

## Syria: end sanctions and find a political solution to peace

Further attempts were made last month to initiate peace talks in the Syrian conflict, and in the context of the devastated economic, social, and health systems, such a political solution aimed at halting all fighting must be given priority over blaming one side or the other. There is evidence to suggest that a revival of basic health services can act as a trigger to bring together warring sides.<sup>1</sup>

As Syrian public health doctors and advisers who once helped establish one of the best national health systems in the region,<sup>2</sup> we do not find it difficult to understand concerns about failures of the humanitarian aid systems in Syria, as frequently suggested in *The Lancet* and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> However, Syria is rapidly descending into hell, Iraq-style, and the global health community needs to wake up to the implications of this reality.

The economic losses of the country at the end of 2014 stood at US\$143.8 billion,<sup>4</sup> with more than 80% of the population living in poverty, of whom a third (32.6%) were in abject poverty, unable to obtain even basic food items. More than half of the population (52.8%) is displaced, of whom a third are internally displaced. Life expectancy has been reduced from 75.9 years in 2010 (one of the highest in the region for countries not part of the Gulf Cooperation Council) to 55.7 years in 2014—a loss of 20 years.<sup>4</sup> The unemployment rate rose from 15%<sup>5</sup> in 2011 to 55.7% in 2014, with more than 3 million losing work within the first 2 years of the conflict. The cost of basic food items has risen six-fold since 2010, although it varies regionally. With the exception of drugs for cancer and diabetes, Syria was 95% self-sufficient in terms of drug production before the war. This has virtually collapsed as have many hospitals and primary health-care centres.

Economic sanctions have not removed the President: as with other countries under siege, in the region and elsewhere, only civilians are in the line of fire, attested to by the dire state of household and macroeconomies. Sanctions are among the biggest causes of suffering for the people of Syria and a major factor perpetuating the conflict,<sup>6</sup> and our predictions of a warlord economy of plunder<sup>7</sup> has already taken hold as unemployed young people among others are opportunistically recruited to fight for Jihadist groups, now mainly ISIS, destroying infrastructure for economic and political gain.

Economic sanctions have exacerbated the brutality of this conflict many-fold, removing any prospects for peace and reconciliation. We need some reality to gauge their manifold effects before Syria descends into another Iraq, the devastating health consequences of which were well documented.<sup>8</sup>

Syria urgently needs a political initiative for peace, before this military conflict generates a major humanitarian health catastrophe, worse than what we are now witnessing; then we cannot say we did not know. We only have to look at Iraq.<sup>9</sup>

We declare no competing interests.

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